

(Editorial note: abstracted from a 5 page "letter" by C. P. in response to another letter written by an irate reader of Wormwood which was published as a broadside in WR. Many correspondents felt that the broadside letter was a fake -- a joke in poor taste. Wormwood assures all readers that the broadside letter was real. Christopher's response will be published in greater detail in a memorial volume now being assembled by Poesie Vivante.)

"I'm not here interested in defending Bukowski (I'm only interested in defending poetry). Bukowski, I'm sure, is quite capable of defending himself -- if he thinks it's worth the bother. But I do have a certain admiration for spontaneous writing. I've done a little myself: enough to know that sloppy and spontaneous are not synonymous. Good spontaneous writing takes control -- the kind of control that comes from a working knowledge of language, a knowledge of the function and subtleties of language. You can only let yourself go when there's something to let go, you see. You have to learn to hang on before you can let go. And that takes practice -- and thinking (as a poet) -- and believe it or not, GUTS! (That's right, Harry, it takes guts to be a poet today: not the kind of quick guts you think I mean -- making it possible to charge a machine-gun nest singlehanded, out of madness or desperation -- no, I'm talking about what you might call "endurance guts," the kind you need to know you're going to perform your stunt in an empty tent, with no crowd applauding but your own echo -- and still go through with it -- having weighed all the odds against you beforehand: knowing that what you have to give nobody wants anyway, and yet giving it -- Why? -- because you know that the world needs what you have even if it doesn't want it. You're healthier -- for being a poet -- and so you KNOW. It's a kind of arrogance if you like -- but it's the arrogance which is part-&-parcel of a poet's kit.)

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My education, like Bukowski's, has bred a certain language: it doesn't make my language better or worse, it makes it different. But it's MY language -- not the language of a class or a fashion, of a coterie or a profession. A language which I've learned to use by using it, getting rid of the encumbrances, and adding a little frill now and then, here and there, when I felt like it. Bukowski has done the same. And that's (in part) what makes him (and me) a poet -- and what makes it impossible for you, Harry, to be a poet. For it's not a question of setting one "proper" word down next to another, chopping up lines, counting stresses or syllables, rhyming or not rhyming, beating a drum tattoo on the desk, humming a little tune, whistling maybe -- it's a question of saying what is inexplicable in any other way, what

can only be said AS POETRY ... or, to paraphrase Frost when asked to explain one of his poems: "if I could have explained it better, then I would have written it differently." The word POETRY comes from the Greek word for "to make" -- a poet MAKES: he doesn't pick up other people's half-chewed words and expressions and try to pass them off as his own: he MAKES -- and, like the carpenter, he uses the tools he has. Bukowski uses the tools he has: the language of a city, a country, a time, AND a condition. And he searches for a better condition AS A POET. His poems are social in a sense -- yet what makes him a poet as opposed to many who never get beyond their social message, is that he transcends the social -- his microcosmic four-walled world becomes an eye onto the universal macrocosm. The poet offers no sure solutions, no quick remedies: that isn't his function. His is a sure, slow, magic box -- and without wanting to, he takes on a burden which, without him, might make life unbearable. Laugh as you might, Harry, I mean unbearable for those like you, who know nothing of poetry -- who think poetry is pretty words pasted together in a sing-song carnival way to produce a sticky peppermint picture. When Bukowski succeeds with HIS words, he has a poem. If he doesn't, he's tried. He is an uneven poet -- and there have been other uneven poets: Verlaine, Apollinaire, Mayakovsky, Pound -- to name a few -- we would be infinitely poorer if we lacked the magic of the best of these poets. What's important is that Bukowski writes and thinks and says and maybe breathes POEMS, not for the wrong reasons, but because he's a poet -- and because that's the way his mind-heart works, and not in any other way. Sure, there are lots of phoney poets just as there are phoney politicians and phoney preachers and phoney admen. So you learn to tell a phoney from the real thing. Bite into a bum nickel, Harry, and what do you get?

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Poetry is not a hobby. It is a way of life, a way of thinking -- not social but intrinsic -- a way of thinking through the pores -- a way of KNOWING. It has nothing to do with vocation or profession. It is not a way out of a dilemma -- or a substitute for some other occupation or lack of occupation. I insist that it is not for the dabblers and the illiterate in soul. The poets that I know are poets in spite of themselves, pay the daily tithe to the muse in spite of themselves. Morality has nothing to do with poetry; and poetry is not to be judged on moral or theological grounds (we would have to discard a good half of the world's BEST POETRY if judged by your standards, Harry). Verse, rhyme, rhythm, couplet or alexandrine have nothing to do with poetry unless they ARE poetry. They are to poetry as the church is to religion: a means of implementation."

-- Christopher Ferret

Roma/ Aug., 1964